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METRO

Plan to alter Aurora police, fire recruitment draws ire from civil service commissioners

by **MAX LEVY, Sentinel Staff Writer**
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Thomas Stephenson, a new Aurora Police recruit, sits in a K-9 training class on Tuesday Aug. 23, 2016 at City of Aurora Public Safety Training Center. Photo by Gabriel Christus/Aurora Sentinel

Aurora Police recruits sit in a K-9 training class at City of Aurora Public Safety Training Center.
Photo by Gabriel Christus/Aurora Sentinel

AURORA | Aurora's City Council could vote soon to take the responsibility of hiring police and firefighters out of the hands of the independent Civil Service Commission, instead giving the responsibility back to city agencies.

Representatives of the Civil Service Commission say the group opposes the plan.

The commission serves a controversial role in the hiring and discipline of police officers and firefighters — currently, the five-person citizen commission must sign off on the hiring of new recruits and may grant appeals of discipline imposed by supervisors in the police and fire departments.

Advocates for police reform have accused the commission of standing up for bad cops, particularly after the group's decision in 2018 to reinstate a police officer who was fired for making racist remarks about Black people.

Some of those same advocates now say the commission has begun to shed its negative reputation following a push to diversify the group's membership and a pattern of upholding discipline imposed by the police chief.

The commission was also targeted for reforms in the consent decree agreement between the City of Aurora and the Colorado Attorney General's Office. Under the terms of the agreement, the commission will make as much of the disciplinary process public as possible and change the hiring process so new recruits meet with their hiring agency sooner.

Commission members say two police officers or firefighters sit in on all interviews of new recruits currently,

along with a citizen.

On Thursday, Councilmember Dustin Zvonek unveiled a resolution that would shift the responsibility of hiring entry-level employees from the commission to the city's Human Resources Department "to ensure Aurora Fire Rescue and Aurora Police will have the final decision on which applicants are hired."

"We have to make this change. It's not an option," Zvonek said during a City Council policy committee meeting. "For those of us on the elected side who care and are very concerned about the number of hires and the number of people that are attending our academies, there will be more accountability, as this will now go through the city manager structure."

The consent decree orders that the hiring process be modified so that "Aurora Police and Aurora Fire Rescue, with coordination and assistance from the Aurora Human Resources Department, will assume a much more active role in the hiring of candidates from the eligibility lists prepared by the Commission and have the final say on which candidates are hired."

It further acknowledges that the change will require changes to the commission's rules, and that the city manager and Human Resources Department should work with the commission on those changes, with the consent decree monitor reviewing the changes to make sure they are consistent with the goals of the decree.

Pete Schulte, an attorney for the city, said Thursday that the commission was established early in the city's history to combat the possibility of political corruption and assumed its current role in hiring and firing firefighters and police in the early 2000s.

Aurora's city charter defines the responsibilities of the commission, including the "examination and certification of all applicants to positions in the Civil Service."

Schulte argued that rolling back the commission's authority over hiring wouldn't take a charter change and said the group's assumption of new responsibilities over hiring didn't require the charter to be rewritten either.

Zvonek said an applicant would still have the option to appeal to the Civil Service Commission if their application is rejected, and the commission would still be responsible for looking into candidates' backgrounds and administering tests.

None of the members of the policy committee objected to the item, which is slated to move forward to a study session with the entire City Council.

Harold Johnson, who chairs the Civil Service Commission, later said he and other commissioners have serious concerns about whether the city would be violating the charter by rolling back the commission's powers.

Johnson also said he was worried about the resolution's sponsors trying to fast-track the item through the policymaking process without receiving public input.

"They just want to push this through," he said. "The commission very much has concerns about it and whether or not it violates the city charter. … I'm of the belief that absolute power corrupts absolutely. I think the checks and balances help."

Johnson and Commissioner Barb Cleland also pushed back on the idea that new police and fire recruits don't have the chance to meet with agency representatives prior to hiring, saying that two police officers or two firefighters sit in on all interviews, along with a citizen.

"I can't think of a time when we weren't all in agreement," Johnson said.

Cleland said she believed the authors of the consent decree did not fully understand the interview process employed by the commission.

"No one has followed through to see exactly what we do and how we do it," she said. "I think we do a pretty good job. We're trying to get police and firefighters to work in the city, understanding that we're changing how we do police and fire."

Johnson said a public meeting was planned for Nov. 17 at city hall to discuss the proposal, but the staff administrator of the commission, Matt Cain, later wrote in an email that Johnson had called off the meeting, "cit(ing) a desire for allowing the Commission more time to allow for any updates on the draft Resolution that Council may discuss in a future Study Session."

John

November 14, 2022 at 11:36 pm

This is some silliness. Why are we hamstringing our police and fire. You know what it is to get a hour or two for someone to respond in NE Aurora. This is silly. We pay as much as in taxes for a safe and secure neighborhood. When there's a crime that is deemed non priority that's silly. Crime is crime. We need more officers. And the fire dept this structure here is arse backwards.

Don Black

November 15, 2022 at 10:53 am

Scythian proverb. “Wise men argue causes…fools decide them”.

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